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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1767

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RHMFIS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000286

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/02/2016

TAGS: IS LE PGOV PREL PTER SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: SINIORA NOT OPTIMISTIC THAT SHIA
MINISTERS WILL RETURN ANYTIME SOON

REF: SECSTATE 12817

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) Following a two-hour meeting with Hassan Nasrallah on February 1, Prime Minister Siniora told the Ambassador the next morning that he was "not optimistic" the boycotting Shia ministers will soon return to his government. Siniora stated further that his cabinet cannot push through the necessary political and economic reform packages without legitimate Shia participation in those decisions. He said he will continue to engage with Nasrallah in an attempt to convince the Shia ministers to return. While Siniora is confident that his partners in the March 14 coalition (Hariri, Jumblatt and Samir Ja'ja') will in the end support his efforts at reconciliation with the Shia, he is annoyed and frustrated by the damaging sniping from the Aoun camp. Siniora confided that the Sunni (i.e., Sa'ad Hariri) will never support an Aoun presidency. Additionally, the prime minister said he has some fence mending to do with the Saudis, who resent him for the recent collapse of their Lebanon-Syria mediation effort. Regarding fugitive Mohammad Ali Hamadei, Siniora listened intently to the demarche delivered by the Ambassador, and the implications on U.S.-Lebanese relations of a failure to turn over these terrorists, but he asked for USG understanding of the political reality of Lebanon at this time. He stated his belief that Syrian President Bashar Asad, and the radical elements in Hizballah and the Palestinian rejectionist groups, would like nothing better than for the Hamadei situation to damage relations between the U.S. and the reformist Siniora government. Finally, the prime minister appeared relaxed about the impending start of USG-funded Radio Sawa broadcasting from transmitters located in Lebanon. End summary.

¶12. (C) Prime Minister Fouad Siniora received the Ambassador and poloff at his office in Beirut on February 2. The prime minister's senior advisor, Mohammad Chatta, and his assistant, Roula Nouraddine, also attended the meeting. Siniora patiently described his political difficulties and displayed a resolute commitment to find a solution, but he also voiced increasing pessimism about an early resolution.

THE CRITICAL WORDS

¶13. (C) As part of his now six-week old effort to resolve the cabinet crisis, Siniora again met with Hassan Nasrallah on February 1 in an attempt to convince the Hizballah leader that no one was benefiting from the current impasse -- the

government was essentially paralyzed on matters of importance, and Hizballah was increasingly being viewed by the non-Shia communities as an obstructionist pawn of Syria. According to Siniora's description of the meeting, however, little-to-no progress was achieved. As in the last meeting with the Ambassador nine days earlier, Siniora displayed an increasing degree of pessimism that an agreement could soon be reached. Nasrallah is apparently holding out for "three critical words" from the government, i.e., that his organization is not considered a militia. For his part, Siniora indicated to the Ambassador that he was holding fast to the wording of the July ministerial statement that recognized the organization as the "resistance" (but made no mention of militia) and was trying to convince Nasrallah to leave well enough alone. From Siniora's comments regarding the lack of progress, however, it seems that the Siniora-Nasrallah conversations are almost endless exercises in circular reasoning.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador, in the wake of his recent meetings with Walid Jumblatt and Samir Ja'ja' (during which the veteran pols criticized the closed nature of Siniora's dialogue with Nasrallah), asked the prime minister if his political flank was covered. Siniora claimed he understood the concerns of his March 14 colleagues, but insisted they would support his position in the end. After all, Siniora commented, what was the alternative? He maintained that with the Shia community united behind Hizballah (and its Amal vassal), the government was compelled to resolve the crisis by enticing the Shia back into the fold. Siniora said that he had often solicited creative options from his political allies, but all he ever received was silence.

¶5. (C) The real problem in terms of eroding support,

BEIRUT 00000286 002.2 OF 003

continued the prime minister, was the highly critical and sometimes difficult-to-decipher positions of Michel Aoun. Siniora asked for U.S. assistance with Aoun -- to lessen the damage he was inflicting on the government (and the political cover he was giving Hizballah). But Siniora conceded that Aoun probably understands he would never have the support of the Sunni political establishment in his transparent quest for the presidency, hence his increasing opposition to the Siniora government.

¶6. (C) Siniora said he was trying to save the situation -- and the reform movement -- by "allowing things to cool down." Siniora stated that in his meetings with Nasrallah, the latter had said that he would "do his utmost" to keep the Shia in the government, that is to prevent outright resignation of the boycotting ministers. Siniora stated that Amal leader Nabih Berri was continuing to help also, but his own approach to resolving the standoff (with a new ministerial statement) had the advantage of being comprehensive. If successful, not only would it bring consensus back to cabinet deliberations, but it would expand the role of the UNIIIC, as well as limit Hizballah's influence in Lebanon "in both duration and extent." Siniora argued that at this point in time, consensus rule in Lebanon was necessary, and as such, compromise with Hizballah was the only way forward. Siniora concluded by saying that as a pragmatist, he would not pursue a "mirage." Although the prime minister acknowledged he was "not confident" he could achieve a solution, the stakes for Lebanon and the region were too great not to keep trying. Siniora maintained there were many in Syria, and some in Lebanon, who were keenly interested in having things "spin out of control" and he was firm in his resolve to prevent that from happening.

¶7. (C) Siniora also indicated he would soon be traveling to Saudi Arabia for "fence mending" negotiations with the Saudi regime, whom he described as resentful of the manner in which their recent mediation efforts were rejected. Concerning the announced visit of Egyptian Intelligence Director Omar Soliman and the apparent opening of a GOE mediation effort,

the prime minister said, despite what was being avidly reported in the Lebanese press, there was "no real Egyptian initiative in the actual sense of the word." Although the press reported Soliman would arrive today, Siniora said that, because of Egypt's involvement in pressing Palestinian issues, the Soliman visit to Lebanon (and Damascus) was not yet scheduled. Siniora said he welcomed GOE assistance, but that the solution of the crisis was in Lebanon. What Siniora said he would welcome from the Egyptians would be assistance to: convince Syria "to stop its killing machine" in Lebanon, as well as address the subject of Palestinian arms located outside the refugee camps, an issue which had regional complications.

MOHAMMAD ALI HAMADEI
AND OTHER TWA HIJACKERS

¶8. (C) Using the points in reftel, the Ambassador delivered a copy of a diplomatic note requesting that Lebanon extradite the four suspects (Mohammed Ali Hamadei, Hasan Izz-al-Din, Ali Atwa, and Imad Fayiz Mughiyah) in the 1985 TWA 847 hijacking. Prime Minister Siniora listened to the Ambassador's extended discourse on the importance of action and its possible implications on U.S.-Lebanese relations. As in previous discussions of this critical issue, Siniora expressed genuine appreciation of the seriousness of the US government to bring these terrorists to justice, but he urged understanding in Washington of the impact of complying with the requested action in Lebanon. He argued that nothing would please Syria and its supporters more than an opportunity to accuse the GOL of breaking its own laws to support a U.S. request, or to enjoy the benefits of strained U.S.-Lebanese relations in the event of non-support. Siniora acknowledged that the Ambassador would be meeting with both the Minister of Justice and Minister of Foreign Affairs the following day to press this issue and stated he would seriously study the options open to his government.

RADIO SAWA

¶9. (C) The final item discussed involved a notification to the prime minister that as a result of a recent contract executed between USG's Broadcasting Board of governors and a Lebanese media provider, USG-funded Radio Sawa was scheduled to begin broadcasts from four transmitters located in Lebanon

BEIRUT 00000286 003.2 OF 003

on February 6. Siniora said he had already been aware of the plan, but appreciated hearing the details before the transmissions commenced. Although his advisor sought clarification about the content of the broadcasts, the prime minister did not voice any concerns.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Siniora seems to have abandoned his efforts to draft a text that would induce the five Shia ministers to return to the cabinet. This is good news, as his proposed (and much edited) text crossed international red lines and did not have the support even of Siniora's closest cabinet allies. But, with Plan A for cabinet reunification shelved, he does not seem to have a viable Plan B. UNSYG's Personal Representative for Lebanon Geir Pedersen told us separately that, in his conversations with Hezbollah members, it is clear that Hezbollah has no intentions of backing down from its insistence that the cabinet declare Hezbollah "resistance," not a militia, and therefore not subject to UNSCR 1559.

¶11. (C) Siniora did not create this cabinet crisis and understands fully that it needs to be resolved -- if it can be resolved -- as quickly as possible. But we also think that he needs to do a much better job of broadening his base

of consultations. So far, he has been running a one-man show of negotiations. The PM would be in a much stronger position if, when he sees Nasrallah, he can speak authoritatively that Sa'ad Hariri, Walid Jumblatt and his ministers, Samir Ja'ja' and his minister, and the other cabinet ministers are all with him. Even better, but more difficult, would be if he can somehow woo Michel Aoun to his side.

FELTMAN